The Frame of Reference in the Social Sciences (1945)[a]

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Social science is an empirical science dealing with facts and their causes, and nothing but facts and their causes. Let us assume that we know what a fact is and what a cause is. Then the first difficulty arises from the circumstance that social science doesn't want to[29] deal with *all* social facts, but only with *relevant* facts. It presupposes then *criteria* of relevance. The system of those criteria may be called the frame of reference. Without a[30] frame of reference social science would have no subject matter. Without a[31] frame of reference, no facts. The question then is, how do we get a sensible frame of reference? The best solution would be a frame of reference which is in no way arbitrary and accidental: the *natural* frame of reference, that is to say, a conceptual scheme that mirrors or articulates the essential structure of society as such, and therefore of every *possible* society. This essential structure would be defined by the *purpose* of society,[32] or by the natural *hierarchy* of its purposes. The essential structure and the hierarchy of the purposes would guide the social scientist, they would tell him what is essential and therefore important, and what is accidental and therefore unimportant, to say nothing of the fact that it would tell him what is good and bad. The accidental would not be regarded as absolutely unimportant. It would be of *crucial* importance for a given group of people here and now, that is to say, for *action*, and therefore it deserves the most careful attention of the statesman or citizen. But from the point of view of the social scientist—who as such is not a statesman or citizen but a *teacher* of statesmen or citizens; who as a scientist is a citizen of the *world*, not of any particular country—the practically important things which are accidental and ephemeral would have to be kept in their place, in a subordinate place.

An example: the idiosyncrasies of a dictator are terribly important for

[a] This typescript can be found at Leo Strauss Papers, box 14, folder 10. The transcript was prepared and annotated by J. A. Colen and Svetozar Minkov.

all who have to live with that dictator, but these idiosyncrasies are not the essence of dictatorship.[33]

Present-day social science is inclined to reject the very notion of a natural frame of reference. It is inclined to think that the notion of a natural frame of reference is based on a fundamental delusion, or on blindness to an all-important fact. That fact is called history. There cannot be a natural frame of reference if society as society doesn't have a permanent or unchangeable character or structure. But, it is argued, society changes radically. That is to say, its very structure differs from period to period or from[34] civilization to civilization. Furthermore: there cannot be a natural frame of reference if man is not able[35] to raise himself[36] above his historical situation to a realm of "essences" which is not affected by historical change. But, it is argued, human thought itself is radically historical; man doesn't think in a vacuum, human thought always belongs to a historical and dynamic context, with whose change human thought itself changes. Accordingly, there are as many frames of reference as there are historical situations. Even granting that in every historical situation the core is "man in[37] society," that is to say, something which is permanent, it is impossible to grasp and to express that permanent thing in a permanently valid manner, in a manner which in principle is valid for all men and all times. Man's understanding of man and society is always bound up with a historical situation to which the individual thinker happens to belong. Or, to state it more simply, the frame of reference of the social sciences is the totality of fundamental questions we address to social phenomena. These questions depend upon the point of view, or the direction of interest, of the questioner. But the point of view or the direction of interest depends upon the social situation, that is to say, on something radically changing or historical. Hence there cannot be a natural frame of reference, that is to say, a conceptual scheme which in principle is final, valid once and for all. The only scheme which is possible is a[38] scheme belonging to our situation, our age—a scheme which is, strictly speaking, ephemeral. Our present scheme will be replaced by another one as soon as our age has ceased to be. The scheme imposed upon us by our situation, by our historical fate, has to be made explicit, it has to be clarified, it has to be liberated from the residues of earlier and obsolete ways of thinking. After this treatment, our scheme permits us to study social phenomena in a scientific manner, it allows us to study the social phenomena which are relevant from our present point of view and *as* they are relevant from our

present point of view. The scheme doesn't reflect the essential nature of society. It reflects the questions which we here and now are forced to address to social phenomena. The scheme does not correspond to the structure of the subject matter. Compared with the subject matter, our scheme has the character of a construction, of an artificial model: our scheme consists of ideal types. Our scheme is then a mere tool for the articulation of social reality; it has no cognitive value in itself.

Is social science possible on the basis of such a type of frame of reference? My answer is no. For this kind of frame of reference admittedly reflects the way in which our own society understands itself in our own time. Accordingly, by using such a frame of reference we interpret societies other than our own in terms that are wholly alien to those societies. We force those societies into the Procrustean bed of our conceptual scheme. We do not understand those societies as they understand themselves. But the way in which a society understands itself is an essential element of its *being*, not to say that[39] it is the very essence of each society. Hence we shall not understand those societies as what they *are*. And since we cannot understand our own society adequately if we do not understand societies other than our own, we will not be able to understand even our *own* society. We have then to liberate ourselves from the frame of reference that fate has imposed upon us, so that we can understand societies other than our own as they understand themselves, and therewith, ultimately, our own society. Otherwise, by going to remote times and countries, we shall never leave our here and now, we shall remain enmeshed in a learned parochialism.

If our frame of reference essentially belongs to our historical situation, it is a *hindrance* to our understanding of *other* societies. If we want to understand other societies, we have to understand them in terms of *their* frames of reference. After having abandoned the notion of a natural frame of reference, we have now to abandon the view that any single frame of reference will do. We shall have to have a *variety* of frames of reference in accordance with the[40] variety of societies. Social science has to become strictly historical or interpretative. For example, we must not impute the notion of "state" [a typically modern notion][41] or the distinction between "state" and "society" to any society which doesn't know of it. Or the notion of "art," and the implied distinction between "art," "religion," "morality," and "science." Needless to say, this[42] would apply to the key concept "civilization" itself. No society but Western society of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

ever understood itself as "*a* civilization." We must open our minds to the possibility that concepts of an entirely different type would have to become our guiding notions.

But it is impossible to leave it at that.[43] However great and deep the variety of societies, they all are societies. If the term social science is to have any meaning, it must be concerned ultimately with one self-identical object. We express this identity by speaking of societies. But the question arises whether the notion "society," while less *dated* than the notion "civilization," is not also bound up with a specific orientation. One merely has to try to translate the term[44] "societies" as we use it into Greek to see this. We seem to penetrate to a deeper or more elementary stratum by substituting for society "we here with our way," as distinguished from "they there with their way." It would seem that this orientation is truly universal, that is to say, it is universally *understood*. By making the notion "we here with our way" the key concept, we might seem to keep within the horizon, the *conscious* horizon, of every possible society. A notion of this kind would meet the two decisive conditions: universal applicability, and universal *intelligibility*.

But still, however careful and ascetic we might try to be, we cannot help adding something of our own and therewith interfering with the object of our studies. The study of societies has frequently been guided by the distinction between environment and civilization. Students have tried to understand a civilization, or the world of a people, as a product of its environment. This approach has been questioned because it didn't take into consideration the element of freedom underlying the emergence of a civilization or a world. One conceives therefore of a civilization as a product of a *response* to the environment. To this view one rightly objects by saying that the various societies do not conceive of their world in that manner. What we call their environment, meaning by it the *condition* of their world, is for them a *part* of their world. Mr. Riezler has[45] illustrated this occasionally by the example of the tin cans and the Andaman Islanders.[a] The tin cans are not tin cans for the Andaman Islanders. If we want to understand the world

[a] See Riezler, "Some Critical Remarks," 490: "An anthropologist reports that the Andaman Islanders collect (empty) tin cans. He can be said to describe the life of the Andaman Islanders in terms of his own environment. But these are tin cans, 'objectively'; they are manufactured in Philadelphia, as tin cans. Yes, but this kind of objectivity is irrelevant. They are what they are in the environment of the Andaman Islanders—rare, round, shiny objects—by virtue of the role they play in Andaman life."

of the Andaman Islanders, we have to understand those objects which we know as tin cans, exclusively, in the way in which the Andaman Islanders understand them. Still, we have to admit that we understand the situation *better* if we take into consideration the fact that the objects in questions *are* tin cans. Can we make ourselves more ignorant than we are? And if we could, why should we? Knowing that the objects are tin cans, whereas the Andaman Islanders do not know it, we are forced to understand those people *better*[46] than they understand themselves. We have to *transcend* their world in order to *understand* their world. In the language of a famous[47] philosopher, social science has to understand both how things are *in* themselves, and how they are *for* a given people: the full understanding of a society comprises both, the "in itself" and the "for them."

An anthropologist comes to a tribe never visited before by anthropologists. By some means, he has acquired adequate knowledge of the language of the tribe before joining them. He has an open mind. By living with these people, by avoiding leading questions, he will try to find out gradually what *their* frame of reference is: what *they* consider most important or most fundamental. They may not know that there is *anything* which they consider most fundamental or most important; as M. Jourdain did not know that he was talking prose all his life,[a] their frame of reference is only implicit. The mere fact that he wants to know something from them that[48] they do not really know [they know it only implicitly][49] affects[50] the situation. By bringing something to their attention which was not a theme for *them*,[51] he alters the way in which they understand themselves. That is, he alters their *world*. The mere fact that he has come to them to *understand* their *way*, and not to spy on them, nor to trade with them, nor to hide among them, affects the situation. By getting a glimpse of the idea of science, of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, they cease to be the people they were.

To sum up: it is impossible to leave it at trying to understand other societies as they understand themselves. We are forced to transcend the self-understanding of the various societies.

We cannot understand societies other than our own with the help of *our* frame of reference. We cannot understand them[52] through *their* frame of reference. Is there any alternative? Is there a frame of reference which is neither ours nor theirs? Only a frame[53] of reference which does not belong

[a] This reference to Molière's *Le bourgeois gentilhomme*, act 2, scene 4 has been added by hand.

to any particular society, only a *natural* frame of reference will do. How are we to obtain such a frame of reference?

To *find* a way let us return to the point where we *lost* our way. Everything seemed all right as long as we could leave it at *our* frame of reference, at our *Western* frame of reference, which seemed to correspond to the last and richest stage of the cultural development of mankind from its beginning till now. I am referring to the scheme that is underlying the notion that the way of a people is a *civilization*, and that a civilization consists of art, morality, religion, economics, law, science, etc. This scheme became doubtful because we realized that it is essentially related to a peculiar civilization, and truly adequate only when applied to that particular civilization. We can state this somewhat more precisely. Our frame of reference is the outgrowth of the combination of two radically different traditions [Greek and Hebrew],[54] of a *peculiar combination* of two *peculiar ways*. The question is, whether a better understanding of our frame of reference, in its peculiar character, will not liberate us from its limitations.

Our frame of reference, to repeat, is the product of a[55] combination of two peculiar ways. Yet the two radically different ways, the Greek way and the Hebrew way, have a common basis. This common basis shows itself if we go back from the peaks to the roots: from Plato's dialogues to Lycurgus as the Spartans saw him, from Jesyah[56] or Paul to Moses as the Hebrews saw him. Provisionally expressed, the common basis is the notion of a divine law, a notion that can be shown to be a necessary consequence or a more thoughtful expression of what all peoples originally mean when they speak of their way. For "our way" is the ancestral way, the way of our ancestors, but it doesn't make sense to cling to the way of our ancestors if our ancestors were not superior to us. And superiority to *us* ultimately means superiority to human beings as such, that is to say, divinity.

The notion of divine law became questionable in the moment when man became sufficiently familiar with the variety of ancestral or divine ways, or with[57] the contradiction between these ways. Out of this experience, there arose the idea of nature and the idea of science. In the light of the ideas of nature and science, the Greeks investigated the various tribes to which they had access. For these investigations they used a clear and simple scheme which is still immediately intelligible to us. At the same time that scheme is historically so close to what was originally common to all peoples that it is least likely to be based on any particular and questionable assumptions. It

seems to me that we would recover the natural frame of reference by recovering the frame of reference used by the classics.

Notes

1. This essay is based on a chapter of José Colen, *Facts and Values* (London: Plusprint, 2010, 2017) and on a text prepared for a seminar at Notre Dame University that was modified and included in an essay that was co-authored with Svetozar Minkov (see note 18).

2. *NRH*, 8.

3. Cf. however *PAW*, 156: "The authorities to which these people [those who deny the possibility of a final account of the whole] defer are the twin-sisters of Science and History," with *WIPP*, 259: modern physics and its "twin sister, 'the historical consciousness.'"

4. *PAW*, 156.

5. *NRH*, 34–36.

6. Despite a rationale being provided for the transition at the end of chapter 2.

7. *NRH*, 36.

8. *NRH*, 42.

9. LIG, 118. See the whole of "The Living Issues of German Postwar Philosophy" (1940), Leo Strauss Papers, box 8, folder 14. Pages and quotes are from Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*.

10. LIG, 126.

11. Cf. Leo Strauss, "Existentialism," *Interpretation* 22, no. 3 (1995).

12. LIG, 126–29.

13. Cf. on Strauss and social sciences and Max Weber in particular: Nasser Behnegar, *Leo Strauss, Max Weber and the Scientific Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

14. *NRH*, 35–37.

15. *NRH*, 38.

16. Ibid.

17. *NRH*, 39.

18. On the circumstances of this piece, see José Colen and Svetozar Minkov, "A Controversy about the Natural Frame of Reference and a Universal Science: Leo Strauss and Kurt Riezler," *Kairos: Revista de Filosofia & Ciência* 10 (2014).

19. See Strauss to Asch, February 17, 1953. I thank Svetozar Minkov for this reference.

20. On Strauss's longer discussion of Riezler in *WIPP*, cf. Susan Shell, "'Kurt Riezler: 1882–1955' and the 'Problem' of Political Philosophy" in *Leo Strauss's Defense of the Philosophic Life*, ed. Rafael Major (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 191–214.

21. Kurt Riezler, "Some Critical Remarks on Man's Science of Man," *Social Research* 12, no. 4 (1945): 481–505.

22. See Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Alfred Dove (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1867–1890); Ranke, *Das Briefwerk*, ed. W. P. Fuchs (Munich: Hoffmann und

Campe, 1949); Heinrich Rickert, *Grundprobleme der Philosophie* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1934); Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, 4th ed., ed. J. Winckelmann (Tübingen: Mohr, 1973). Cf. Raymond Aron, *La philosophie critique de l'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), especially the chapter on Rickert. Max Weber considers the problem on Rickert's terms and tries to address it on the basis of two different criteria: the selection of facts, necesary from the present viewpoint, depends on relevance and on posterity.

23. On "frame of reference," "horizon," "comprehensive view," see *NRH*, 26, 39, 125.

24. Cf. "On Collingwood's Philosophy of History," *Review of Metaphysics* 5, no. 4 (June 1952): 559–86.

25. As Strauss says in 1955, "Universal sympathetic understanding is impossible": "To speak crudely, one cannot have the cake and eat it too; one cannot enjoy both the advantages of universal understanding and those of existentialism." "Social Science and Humanism," *RCPR*, 11.

26. See *NRH*, 82–83 and footnote 3 on that page. The influence of Martin Buber's language is apparent.

27. *NRH*, 8, referring to *Physics* 196a25 and ff., 199a3–5.

28. Seminar on natural right, 1962, lecture 2.

29. "want to" was inserted by hand.

30. "a" was inserted by hand.

31. "a" was inserted by hand.

32. "the" before "society" was crossed out.

33. Strauss wrote by hand but then crossed out the following sentence: "What is essential is that in dictatorship the idiosyncrasies of a single man have a terrible effect."

34. "or from" was typed over a crossed-out word.

35. We have changed "capable" to "able."

36. "himself" was inserted by hand.

37. Strauss crossed out "and" and inserted by hand "in."

38. "the" before "a" was crossed out.

39. "that" was inserted by hand.

40. "the" replaced the "a" previously typed.

41. The square brackets are Strauss's.

42. "that" was crossed out and replaced by "this."

43. We have replaced the comma by a period, since the following word is capitalized.

44. "the term" was inserted by hand.

45. "has" was inserted by hand.

46. "better" was inserted and underlined by hand.

47. A handwritten "famous" replaced a crossed out "[a]n earlier."

48. "that" was inserted by hand.

49. The square brackets are Strauss's.

50. "affects" was typed over the line, replacing "alters" crossed out.

51. "them" was inserted by hand.

52. We have replaced "then" by "them."

53. The word "frame" was repeated and crossed out.

54. The square brackets are Strauss's.

55. "of a" was inserted by hand.

56. Strauss crossed out "Jo" and "Jesaya." Strauss may be referring to Joshua (of Exodus, Numbers, and Joshua), as a peak in the sense of entering the promised land as Moses' successor; another possibility is that the reference is to Jesus.

57. Strauss crossed out "between" and inserted by hand "with."